



News Release

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Service Signs Conservation Agreement with Texas Comptroller and Reopens Public Comment Period for the Dunes Sagebrush Lizard

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it has signed a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) with the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts that provides for the conservation of the dunes sagebrush lizard, a species found in Texas and New Mexico that has been proposed for Endangered Species Act protection. The Service has also reopened the comment period for 15 days on its 2010 proposal to add the lizard to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife to allow the public to review and consider the conservation measures provided in this CCAA, as well as a similar 2008 CCAA in New Mexico, as part of the agency's final listing determination.

"We will continue to work with landowners and the states of Texas and New Mexico to develop these voluntary agreements, which will provide protections for the lizard while providing the regulatory assurance that landowners need to continue to derive economic benefits from their land," said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Regional Director for the Southwest Region.

The dunes sagebrush lizard is native to a small area of southeastern New Mexico and west Texas. The species is a habitat specialist and only occurs in sand dune complexes associated with shinnery oak. The primary threat to the lizard is oil and gas development near dune complexes and shinnery oak removal for the enhancement of forage production for grazing. This has resulted in increased fragmentation of the dunes sagebrush lizard's habitat and gaps in the species' range.

On December 14, 2010, the Service proposed to list the dunes sagebrush lizard as endangered, primarily due to loss of habitat from oil, gas, and ranching operations. In consideration of the scientific disagreement surrounding the lizard's population status, on December 5, 2011, the Service published in the *Federal Register* a 6-month extension on the proposal to list the dunes sagebrush lizard, and opened a 45-day comment period. That comment period closed on January 19, 2012.

The Texas Comptroller submitted the "Texas Conservation Plan for Dunes Sagebrush Lizard (*Sceloporus arenicolus*)" (Texas Plan), which functions as a CCAA between the Service and the Comptroller, as part of the State's application for an Enhancement of Survival Permit for the lizard under Section 10(a)(1)(a) of the ESA in September 2011. The Service published a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) of the permit application in the *Federal Register* on October 6, 2011. The final EA and permit are available at the Service's Southwest Region's website, <http://southwest.fws.gov/>.

The Texas Plan is in effect for 30 years in west and northwest Texas. This area constitutes the CCAA's Planning Area, with covered areas encompassing private lands and state trust lands that provide suitable habitat or are being improved or restored to provide suitable habitat for the dunes sagebrush lizard. If the dunes sagebrush lizard is listed in the future, the Texas Plan would act as a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) supporting future applications for incidental take permits under the ESA. In addition to the Texas Plan, the "Candidate Conservation Agreement for the Lesser Prairie-Chicken and the Sand Dunes Lizard in New Mexico" (New Mexico Plan) was finalized in December 2008.

Under the approved CCAA, participating landowners who undertake actions such as mesquite clearing in sand dunes and avoidance of new activities in sand dunes aimed at conserving the dunes sagebrush lizard and its habitat will receive assurances from the Service that no additional conservation measures above and beyond those contained in the CCAA will be required, should the dunes sagebrush lizard be listed.

The Service will accept written comments and information during the reopened comment period on the December 2010 proposed listing of the dunes sagebrush lizard. The Service is specifically seeking comments on the likelihood of implementation and effectiveness of the conservation measures provided for in both the Texas Plan and the New Mexico Plan. A 15-day comment period

will begin with the publication of this announcement in the *Federal Register* on February 24, 2012. Written comments should be received on or before March 12, 2012.

For further information on how and where to submit comments, and to review and/or download these documents, visit the Service's Southwest Region's website, <http://southwest.fws.gov/>. Comments previously submitted need not be resubmitted, as they will be fully considered in preparation of the final rule.

The Service's priority is to make implementation of the ESA less complex, less contentious and more effective. We seek to accelerate recovery of threatened and endangered species across the nation, while making it easier for people to coexist with these species. To learn more about the Endangered Species Program, visit <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/>.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>.

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